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Africa's Surrogate Wars

The Most Significant Challenge to African Stability and US Security Interests in Africa
Presented by Herman J. Cohen

If one looks back at violent conflict in Africa over the past 50 years, we can conclude that virtually all wars have been internal. The most notable exceptions have been the extremely serious border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea that is ongoing, and the successful war of Rwanda and Angola to overthrow President Mobutu of the DRC in 1996.

An analysis of internal conflict in Africa reveals that these wars fall into two categories: civil wars and surrogate wars. How do these two categories differ?

Civil wars are those that respond to a deep set of grievances held by a significant percentage of the population that supports violent action against the regime in place. In other words, many citizens feel that violence is their only recourse to obtain justice and fairness in their society. They support the war against the regime despite the hardships involved. Examples of true civil wars in Africa since 1960 include Angola, Sudan, Ethiopia, and South Africa/Namibia.

Surrogate wars, on the other hand, are generated entirely from the outside by neighboring governments that have a variety of reasons for wanting to take advantage of a regime's weakness or fragility. In these weak states, populations may have grievances, but are not inclined to resort to violence in order to redress their grievances. They do not necessarily welcome armed intervention, and in most cases reject armed intervention. Examples of surrogate wars include: Liberia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Côte d'Ivoire, and the DRC.

I find it rather ironic that the African Union vigorously denounces unconstitutional seizures of power in member states. Perpetrators of a coup against a legitimate government are banished from the African Union. They are not readmitted until a free and fair election takes place in order to establish a new legitimacy. And yet, when a legitimate African government is overthrown as the result of insurgent action organized from outside its borders, the African Union remains silent. The perpetrators of these illegitimate insurgencies do not even receive a slap on the wrist.

And the international community is just as guilty of turning away its eyes from these immoral and essentially criminal acts.

- When the Rwanda Patriotic Army came across the Rwanda border from Uganda on October 1, 1990, with the full complicity and support of the Government of Uganda, there were no complaints filed against Uganda. As the US Assistant Secretary of State at the time, I admit that we made a grievous error in tolerating this action. Instead of threatening sanctions against Uganda, we granted international legitimacy to the insurgents who had no support within Rwanda. We encouraged negotiations, and at one point, applied heavy pressure on the Ugandan Government in order to force the RPF to enter negotiations with the Rwandan Government. But we continued to provide large amounts of economic aid to Uganda as if

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nothing had happened. The World Bank and other donors also tolerated this unlawful operation.

- When the insurgents of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) came across the border from Côte d'Ivoire on Christmas Eve of 1989, our first instinct was to encourage negotiations between the insurgents and the regime of President Doe. We made a big mistake by not immediately putting pressure on the governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso to stop supplying and financing the insurgents.
- The invasion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in August 1998 by the armed forces of Uganda and Rwanda was successfully thwarted by the armed forces of Angola and Zimbabwe. But this short war was followed by a massive insurgency in the eastern DRC that was organized, financed and supplied by the governments of Rwanda and Uganda. This insurgency has resulted in the unnecessary deaths of millions of Congolese. The African Union and the international community have done nothing to hold these two sponsoring governments accountable for the death and destruction that their surrogates have perpetrated.
- There is an ongoing internal conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. I challenge anyone to argue that this conflict is NOT a surrogate war. That is all I will say on the Côte d'Ivoire matter.

Except possibly for Mozambique, surrogate wars always begin with the idea that the weak governments that are the objects of these wars will fall like ripe hanging fruit. The Rwandan Patriotic Army fully expected the inferior Hutu government to fall within thirty days. Charles Taylor, the leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, fully expected the primitive regime of President Samuel Doe to collapse within thirty days. The Ugandan and Rwandan sponsors of a surrogate war against DRC President Laurent Kabila fully expected the corrupt and dysfunctional Kinshasa regime to collapse in short order. The Côte d'Ivoire surrogates almost succeeded in overthrowing the government of Laurent Gbagbo in one night of killing in Abidjan two years ago, but were forced to retreat to the north.

Let us be clear, surrogate wars cannot take place in countries whose governments are fully in charge and whose military are professionally competent and are fully supported in terms of equipment and livelihood. Surrogate wars can take place only in those countries that are essentially failing states. Some scholars, most recently Jeffrey Herbst and Marina Ottaway, have argued that failing states will inevitably be replaced, one way or another. The vacuum of state impotence has to be filled, and it will be filled mainly from the outside, probably by violence.

I disagree with this hypothetical and simplistic argument. The African experience is that surrogate wars can be launched in countries with weak states, but such wars will not necessarily be clean, quick, and beneficial. On the contrary, the majority of these wars result in significant and prolonged death and destruction. The final result is often not a reborn state with good potential, but anarchy and suffering that serve as an excellent breeding ground for international criminals, drug traffickers, and terrorist cells.

But some would argue that there may be no other way to get rid of so-called horrible corrupt regimes such as Doe in Liberia, Mzee Kabila in the DRC, and Habyarimana in Rwanda. My argument is that more often than not, the cure is worse than the disease, and African stability and security are worse off as a result. Surrogate wars in Africa should be condemned and outlawed. As an American taxpayer, I demand that surrogate sponsors be denied US foreign assistance, and that

we vote against World Bank assistance. I also call upon the African Union to be ashamed for ignoring these horrible actions by some of its members.

How do surrogate wars affect United States Interests in sub-Saharan Africa?

The NPFL surrogate war in Liberia opened the door to illegal diamond trading that was used by El Qaeda terrorist affiliates to launder funds that were eventually used to recruit new terrorists and purchase equipment. The surrogate war in Liberia spilled over into the civil war in Sierra Leone with an expansion of illegal trade in diamonds and other minerals.

The RPF surrogate war in Rwanda led directly to the genocide of 1994 that caused tremendous anguish in the US and major guilt feelings that are yet to be dissipated. The Rwanda genocide inspired the atrocities in Bosnia. The US acquiesced in the establishment of a special international criminal court to try perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. But this was a precursor for the eventual establishment of a generic international criminal court that the US has refused to support or ratify, thereby causing significant problems for US defense cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa.

All of the African surrogate wars have generated major requirements for humanitarian assistance at great expense to the Federal budget. In addition, the subsequent peace agreements, especially in Liberia and the DRC, have required significant UN peacekeeping forces, also at great expense to the Federal budget.

Probably of greatest significance to US security interests in sub-Saharan Africa, weak states have been plunged into the category of failed states as the result of surrogate war. Rwanda is probably the most significant exception to this rule, but it is slowly moving toward incipient instability as a totalitarian minority rule state. The failed states, like the DRC and Liberia are on the margin of “Somalization” and are therefore especially vulnerable to penetration by international enemies of the United States.

Whenever we begin to think that the 20-year trend of surrogate wars in Africa have run their course, a new one seems to pop up. Côte d'Ivoire is the latest iteration. This war provides an excellent example of the negative consequences of the initial failure of the insurgents to achieve their objective rapidly. The surrogate war turns into a prolonged ceasefire with endless negotiations. The surrogate sponsor is unable to back away from its commitment. The surrogate sponsor has no choice but to continue supplying arms and money. The population living under the insurgents is harassed for supplies and shelter. There is significant population displacement. The international community must pay an increasingly heavy humanitarian price. The mediators make the mistake of treating the surrogate insurgents as equal to the legitimate government. They tend to give the insurgents at the negotiating table what they cannot achieve through violence. These actions tend to brutalize the majority of citizens who support the legitimate government. They form militias and secret killing clubs. What democracy that has existed is suppressed in favor of political coercion. A country that was supposed to be a leader of economic development and modernization in Africa has been set back decades because surrogate sponsors want to change a regime in favor of people they control.

The African Union and the international donor community need to adopt the political will to stop treating surrogate wars with impunity and to stop business as usual for the sponsors.